

Research for the Classroom

The Power of Reflective Writing

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For some students, self-examination occurs only when they look into a mirror. The mirror offers reflections that reveal students' unique physical qualities and presents opportunities for students to consider and address areas of need. Similarly, structured opportunities for reflective writing allow students to polish their writings and to reflect actively on their written creations, while encouraging clearer and more honest writing products. In addition, the use of reflective writing can transform students as they begin to incorporate metacognition, or thinking about their thinking, into their writing processes as they simultaneously learn the curriculum.

Although reflective writing allows students to engage authentically in the writing process, pressures toward step-by-step approaches to writing and a one-size-fits-all English language arts curriculum may prevent many students from participating in authentic reflection about their processes of writing as well as their written products.

In past years, I have tried, unsuccessfully, to address this dilemma. Although I have incorporated traditionally structured writing activities and semester-long portfolios into my classroom instruction, I have observed two reoccurring phenomena: First, my students often include in their portfolios the five writing pieces that have earned them the highest grades. Second, when asked to reflect on the writings that they include in their end-of-semester portfolios, students tend to provide brief, superficial explanations for their portfolio selections, such as "I earned an A on this piece" or "This piece is the longest piece I have written."

As I considered these observations, I decided to implement a mixed-methods action research project during the first few weeks of school. Through a reflective writing activity designed to complement my ninth-grade students' first major writing activity of the school year, I intended to achieve three goals: (1) to help students become writers who examined their writing more deeply; (2) to connect the students to their writing and create a sense of ownership through the process of reflection; and (3) to create a *productive problem* for students stemming from a *surplus* of high-quality pieces that would

result from the process of reflection and from which students could choose for inclusion in their writing portfolios.

To encourage the metacognition necessary to support authentic reflection, I introduced two components into student portfolios: Initial Reflection Letters and After Writing Reflection Letters. I hoped that these letters would improve the students' ability to reflect on their writing pieces and provide them with opportunities to examine their engagement with the writing process.

I predicted that the combination of letters would help students to reflect on *each* written piece they produced throughout the semester, instead of reflecting only on the five pieces that they selected for their end-of-semester portfolios. My intention was to encourage students to reflect on the various elements of their papers by responding to standards-based, student-focused questions. The reflection letters capitalize on the fact that these portfolios require students to select their own portfolio pieces rather than having the teacher determine portfolio contents.

I introduced the action research project during our unit study of short stories. As I prepared to present the requirements of the Initial Reflection Letters to my

students, I braced for some opposition. I feared that the students would view the reflective components as extra work. I also worried

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about the level of honesty and trust that students would display in their Initial Reflection Letters. I wondered if they would be willing to admit what they did not know about writing and literature, since we had met just one week earlier when the school year had begun.

Surprisingly, students did not complain when I introduced the purposes of the reflective pieces. They seemed willing to take a "leap of faith." And, to my delight, their enthusiasm did not wane over the next five weeks.

Getting Ready

To begin the short-story unit, I read *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (Houghton, 1984) by Chris Van Allsburg with each class. I used this work to inspire my students to craft rough drafts of their own creative writing. *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* is a virtually textless picture book that contains 14 illustrations, titles, and captions.

After sharing the story with my students, I invited each student to select a picture. Students used these pictures to draft an original story that they worked on throughout the unit. To ensure that the pieces accurately reflected the interpretations of each student, I omitted requirements with

respect to length and literary elements.

Once the students completed their rough drafts, I invited them to participate in a peer-editing activity designed to connect with their Initial Reflection Letters. During this activity, students commented on what they liked, what they disliked, and what they found confusing about their classmates' papers. As students drafted the Initial Reflection Letters, which were addressed to me, they reflected on which suggestions they chose to incorporate into the next draft of the creative writing piece. As a result, students began to view the processes of peer review and reflection as important, concrete parts of the writing process.

Each of my students submitted an Initial Reflection Letter and a creative writing rough draft within the first week of the unit. The Initial Reflection Letter allowed me to assess students' writing skills, and the creative writing rough draft encouraged each student to produce a piece of creative writing that he or she could discuss, revise, and reflect on to build the student's understandings of short-story literary devices.

As I guided my students through the Initial Reflection Letters, I prompted them with standards-based, student-friendly questions. I derived these questions from the NCTE/IRA Standards for the Language Arts and specifically addressed the notions that students ought to participate in literary communities and that students ought to communicate their literary discoveries in ways that suit their purposes and audi-

ences. Question prompts included the following:

1. Did the peer editing activity help you? If so, please explain how the activity helped you—if not, please explain why the activity was not helpful.
2. How do you feel about the progress of your rough draft? Do you anticipate that you will need to revise again?
3. What do you like best about your written piece? What are you most concerned about?
4. What literary devices have you incorporated so far? Please include specific examples from your creative writing. If you have chosen not to include any literary devices, please explain why you have chosen not to include any devices.

In the Initial Reflection Letter, some students offered textbook definitions of the literary devices but could not identify the specific devices in their own stories. Since we had not yet begun our study of literary devices, I was able to assess which students possessed more advanced understandings of literary devices through their initial analyses of their writings. "I believe that my writing does demonstrate I understand narrative writing," shared one student, "I did not use first person but third person point of view. I was able to see into the minds of all my characters in my story if I wanted to."

Despite the fact that some students wrote that they did not have any understanding of literary devices, each student crafted a rough draft for *The Mysteries of*

Harris Burdick creative writing activity.

After reading students' Initial Reflection Letters and creative writing rough drafts, I offered individualized comments to each student during brief, informal conferences, and I also distributed a generalized letter with formal observations about the rough drafts and the content of the written pieces (e.g., conventions, sentence structures, use of literary devices). I also reminded my students that the goals of *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* writing activity were to explore literary devices in short stories and to reflect on the writing itself.

After writing the Initial Reflection letters, students studied various short-story literary devices during the last four weeks of the unit. As students gained familiarity with devices such as mood, tone, and foreshadowing, they decided whether or not to incorporate the device into their creative writing pieces. Once their creative writing pieces were complete, students composed After Writing Reflection Letters.

Results and Implications

Many of the After Writing Reflection Letters demonstrated that students engaged in reflection as students engaged in "creative and critical uses of their knowledge and skills" (Langer 12). As one student wrote in her After Writing Reflection Letter:

During the process of writing this, I enjoyed when we were given choices for the topic. I choose to use a few suggestions. I put some active and passive voice in my paper, and [learned] to make a new

paragraph each time I am using dialogue. Another thing that I chose to think about is that I am the only one that can tell my story. When I first thought about writing this paper, I thought it would be boring. I don't really like to write, but after putting some thought into this paper, I think that it is not too bad. I enjoyed writing this!

When I pulled out the student's Initial Reflection Letter, she smiled, pleased with her growth as a writer. She observed that her Initial Reflection Letter lacked authentic, intrinsic reflection. She explained that she wrote her rough draft hoping to earn a certain grade and—therefore—composed that rough draft consistent with what she thought I wanted her to write. Although she liked parts of her writing, her Initial Reflection Letter revealed concern about her grade: "I like the fact that my paper is [about] young love, but at the same time it is mysterious," the student had written, "but I am concerned that I will get a result back after I turn it in and it will basically tell me to start over." During our final discussion, she explained that she felt empowered by the reflective writing activities because she could explain her understanding of literary devices in her own words and, as a result, was much less focused on her grade.

An analysis of the Initial Reflection Letters, the After Writing Reflection Letters, and in-class discussions showed that many students experienced an increase in specific knowledge about literary devices as demonstrated on the unit assessment. Quantitatively, this year's classes scored 36.7%

higher on the unit assessment. The standards-based unit assessment contains many multiple-choice questions about short-story writing, literary devices, and why authors choose to use certain literary devices. The increase of scores on the unit assessment demonstrated that students could identify literary devices in a variety of contexts better than students in the previous year. In addition, the scores on the final written pieces averaged eleven points higher than the scores from previous years. This result suggests that

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students used their understandings of literary devices to craft creative writing.

Qualitative data showed that students expressed increased engagement in their writings. Through informal conferences and classroom discussions, students indicated that they were encouraged by the process of reflection during the writing process. This is evident in the following excerpt from one student's After Writing Reflection Letter:

This assignment has been really great. I really enjoyed writing my story. At first, I thought this was just going to be another boring, keep us busy project, but I was proved wrong. I am glad I stuck

with writing as much as I did. I just started going and I could not stop. I felt very open. I liked the rough draft part because it is like the middle stage. People can mess up and make it better before they turn in a final draft.

As a result of the positive feedback provided by the students during *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* creative writing assignment, I continue to design writing assignments that incorporate Initial Reflection Letters and

After Writing Reflection Letters. One year after conducting my initial research, I find myself continuously inspired by a student who, after hanging back in the classroom once her peers had fled on a Friday afternoon, offered the highest of compliments: "Thanks for the great assignment." And as my students continue to reflect on their own writings throughout the year, I challenge students to examine their reflections, appreciate their unique features,

and see the beauty of their written images. **EJ**

Works Cited

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Canning

Jars upon jars, words upon words
Cucumbers upon cucumbers

Waiting to be changed from
What was and would not last
To what may last, for a while.

Jars lined upon a cool shelf
Stacked, wiped clean
And labeled Sweet Dill

Like words waiting in chaos
To be gathered, washed, arranged
Sentences split open,
Bits and ends sliced off
Meaning stuffed into form
To offer nourishment beyond the season
Against the coming cold and dark.

—Krista Stevens

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Krista Stevens is the English supervisor in Stoneham, Massachusetts, and writes a monthly column for the magazine *The Covenant Companion*. "A few years ago, I showed my husband a poem I had written for him. Our children asked him why he didn't write poems for me. 'Your mother writes because she can,' he replied cryptically and returned to his garden." She may be reached at Krista.Stevens@verizon.net.